

Playing with Letters: Developing Alphabet Knowledge through Language-Rich & Content-Rich Instruction

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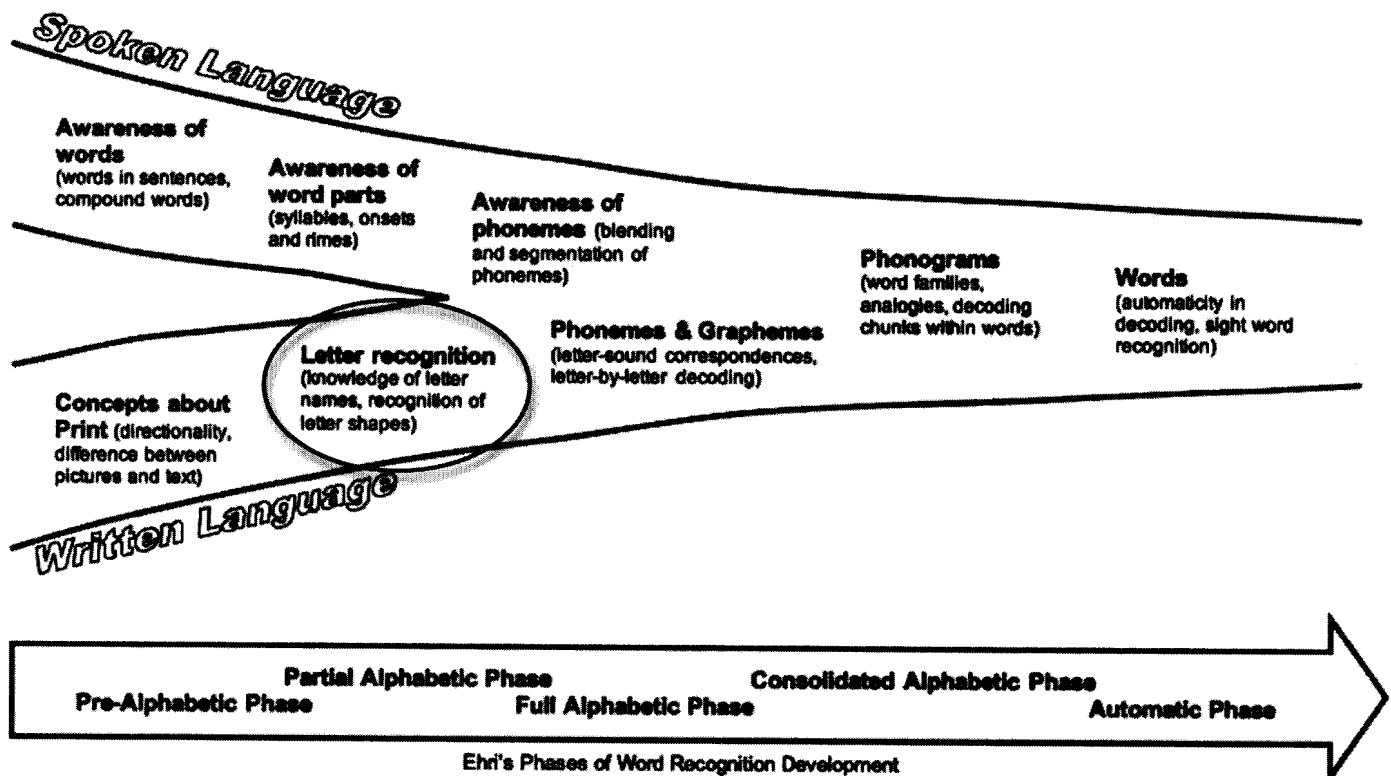
Why is alphabet knowledge important?

- ✱ • A child's ability to identify the letters of the alphabet by name is one of the best predictors of how readily he or she will learn to read.
- ✱ • Without firm knowledge of letters, children will have difficulty with all other aspects of early literacy.

Treiman, Kessler, & Pollo (2006)

Bradley & Stahl (2001)

The Road to Reading Words



What does it mean to “know” a letter?

- Letter-name knowledge
→ What letter is this?
- Letter-shape recognition
→ Point to the letter “a”.
- Letter-sound knowledge
→ What sound does this letter make?
- Ability to print letters
→ Write the letter “a”.
- Rapid letter naming
→ Name these letters as quickly as you can.



Children need to know that . . .

- Letters have features such as sticks, curves, circles, tails, and tunnels.
- Orientation of letters is important.
- There is a specific way to form each letter.
- Each letter has a name and two forms (uppercase and lowercase).
- Each letter is connected to at least one sound.

(Fountas & Pinnell, 1998)

How should the alphabet be taught?

- Alphabet Knowledge is one of the least studied areas of literacy.
- We know why it’s important, but there is limited agreement about what constitutes effective alphabet instruction (Piasta & Wagner, 2010).
- Children can benefit from using their names as a springboard for learning the letters of the alphabet. Children recognize, read, and write their names earlier than other words (Bloodgood, 1999).
- Children are familiar with the letters that make up their own name and are able to recognize the first letter of their name more easily than other letters of the alphabet. This concept has been termed *own-name advantage* (Treiman & Broderick, 1998).
- Children appear to use letter names to help learn and remember letter sounds (Treiman, et al., 2006).
- Handwriting practice helps young children learn and recall letter shapes (Ehri & Roberts, 2006; Berninger, 1999).
- All languages show iconicity in their letter names (Treiman & Kessler, 2003).
- *Children learn alphabet letters most readily when the letters appear in meaningful settings (Neuman, et al., 2000).*

Letter Characteristics that Can Interfere with Alphabet Knowledge Development

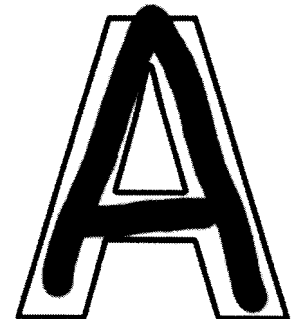
- Some letters look a lot like other letters.
h, n, m b, d, p, q c, o, e M, W O, Q
- Some letters have names that are similar to other letters.
b, c, d, e, g, p, t, v, z f, s, x j, k
- Some letters have sounds that are similar to other letters.
b, p d, t f, v g, k m, n s, z

Letter Characteristics that Can Support Alphabet Knowledge Development

- Some letters look very different from other letters.
s, b r, k o, t f, m
- Most letters have the sound of the letter in their names.
 - All letters except for *h* and *w*
 - Letter sounds at the beginning of the name are very useful: b, d, j, k, p, t, v, z
 - Letter sounds at the end of the name are somewhat useful: f, l, m, n, r, s, x
 - Long vowel letter sounds are the letter names.

Writing Letters

- Learning to form a letter is a great support in learning the letter shape.
- Forming letters does not have to be a pencil and paper task.
 - Air writing
 - Forming the letter in sand, rice, or shaving cream
 - Tracing sandpaper letters or outlined letters
 - Sidewalk chalk or paintbrushes may be easier for writing before fine motor skills are ready for pencils
- The point is learning the correct way to form a letter—where to start, which direction to move, and where to end.
- Instruction in letter formation should be about the *process*, not about the *product*.
- Learning to form the letters correctly promotes handwriting fluency, which is linked with the quantity and quality of written expression.
- Handwriting vs. Penmanship

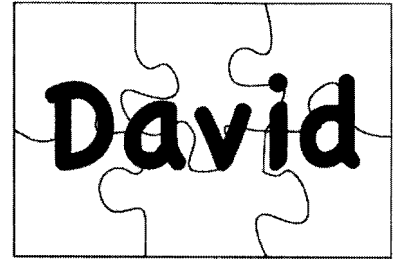


ABC Activities

Letter Name Knowledge

Name Puzzle

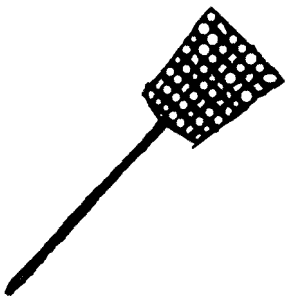
Using a black marker, draw an outline to form a puzzle on tag board. Write the child's name in the center of the puzzle (some teachers create this on their computer) and laminate the puzzle. Cut along the outline of each puzzle piece. Store the puzzle pieces in a baggie for individual use. Before you ask the child to put their name puzzle together, make sure you also have a copy of the child's name for the child to use as a reference. When the puzzle is complete, the child traces each letter with his finger and then says the name of the letter.



Fishing for Names

The teacher places several magnetic letters (letters in the child's name) on a pretend pond and puts the child's name card next to the pond. After the child has practiced fishing for letters with the fishing pole, the teachers asks the child to "fish" for a letter in the child's name and place it beneath the letter in her name card. Then, the teacher asks the child to say the name of the letter. This procedure is repeated until the child has "fished" for all letters in her name, and placed them next to her name card, and identified the letters. Once the child has mastered this activity, you can make it more difficult by adding other letters to the pond besides the ones in the child's name.

Letter Sound Knowledge



Sound Swat

The teacher calls on a child to go to the letter wall and swat a letter she has named. The child then says the letter sound and calls on another student to come up and swat a letter she has named. The student swats the letter and says the sound. This procedure is repeated until all children have several turns or you have gone through the alphabet.

Alphabet Letter Balls

Have the child choose a ball from the bucket of letter balls. Ask the child to identify the letter and the letter sound. Then the child tosses the ball to you. If the child is unable to produce the sound, ask the child to identify the letter. Then you tell the child the sound, the child repeats the sound, tosses the ball to you, then you ask the child to

name an object or animal that begins with that sound as you toss the ball back to the child.

Letter Shape Recognition

T Chart

Using manipulative letters (upper- or lower-case), choose a letter you want the child to learn. Write the letter on one side of the T chart and write “other letters” on the other side. Discuss with the child the specific features of the targeted letter. Then, ask the child to sort the letters according to the T chart.

Venn Diagram

Place your name card and the child’s name card on the table next to the Venn diagram. Ask the child to place the letters of his name in one of the circles and place the letters of your name in the other circle. Next discuss the specific features of the letters and see if the child notices if any of the letters are the same. When he finds the same letters in both names, ask the child to place them in the center of the diagram. This process can be repeated using other children’s names in the classroom.

Ability to Print Letters

Fence Letters

Hang large pieces of paper or bulletin board paper on a fence. Children paint large letters on the paper as you use “letter formation talk.”

Chalk Letters

Using large letter stencils, children trace the letter using colored chalk on the sidewalk.



Rainbow Names

The teacher writes the child’s name in big bold letters on cardstock. The children trace their name over and over again with markers or metallic crayons.

Materials for Teaching the Alphabet and Phonological Awareness

Earobics is a software program designed to develop phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge. <http://www.earobics.com>

Ladders to Literacy: Preschool and kindergarten activity books that provide early literacy activities in phonological awareness, as well as vocabulary development, letter names and sounds. <http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/oconnor-8329/index.htm>

Road to the Code: A Program of Early Literacy Activities to Develop Phonological Awareness includes activities to move students from phonological awareness to letter knowledge. It gradually moves into activities that encourage the application of these skills in writing and spelling. <http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/blachman-4382/index.htm>

Lakeshore Letter Builders: Children build upper and lower-case letters piece by piece. Children simply place the building pieces onto matching shapes on each card, forming letters step by step...and developing a concrete sense of each letter shape. Plus, each letter can be formed with just 1 to 4 pieces—reinforcing the basic lines and curves children use when printing.

<http://www.lakeshorelearning.com/seo/ca|searchResults~~p|2534374302106355~~.jsp>

Magnetic Foam Letters, Upper and Lower Case: Sets of single-color letters are difficult to find, but here are two sources:

1. <http://www.know-its.com/products/available-online/magnetic-foam-letters.html>
2. http://www2.abcstuff.com/cgi/Web_store/web_store.cgi/item=ML131&product=@magletters&keywords=&exact=yes

Letter Recognition and Letter-Sound Fluency Games: The student center activity packet was put together by the Florida Center for Reading Research. It contains activity plans and activity masters that are ready for immediate use in classrooms. These games can be easily taught to the whole class and then placed in an alphabet or word center for independent practice. **NOTE:** These activities should be used **ONLY** with children who have already mastered letter and sound recognition and are working on developing fluency. http://www.fcrr.org/curriculum/pdf/GK-1/F_Final.pdf

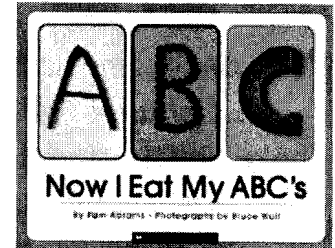
Table Top Pocket Charts: This website has a variety of pocket charts including table top, magnetic, felt, etc. that can be placed in learning centers for independent use. Many of them are sold without activities.

<http://www.learningresources.com/p2p/search/searchresults.do?search=basic&keyword=pocket+chart&sortBy=bestSellers&page=all>

Alphabet, Name, & Print-Salient Books

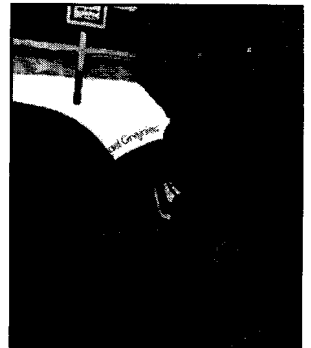
Simple Alphabet Books: Below is a list of alphabet books that are simple with a few words on each page and pictures that most children can recognize. This is particularly important for children with limited prior experience with the alphabet.

ABC: A Child's First Alphabet Book (2003) by Alison Jay
ABC Kids (2000) by Laura Williams
By the Sea: An Alphabet Book (1985) by Ann Blades
Dr. Seuss's ABC (1963) by Dr. Seuss
Eric Carle's ABC (2007) by Eric Carle
K is for Kiss Goodnight: A Bedtime Alphabet (1994) by Jill Sardegan
Now I Eat My ABC's (2004) by Pam Abrams
On Market Street (1981) by Arnold Lobel
The Farm Alphabet Book (2000) by Jane Miller
Winnie the Pooh's A to Zzzz (1992) by Don Ferguson



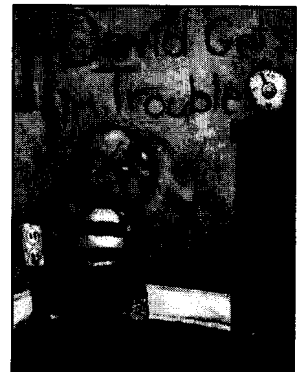
Name Books: Reading one of these books is a fun way to introduce a lesson on learning the alphabet through children's names.

Andy: That's my Name (1973) by Tomie DePaola
Chrysanthemum (1991) by Kevin Henkes
From Anne to Zach (1996) by Mary Jane Martin
Mommy Doesn't Know My Name (1996) by Suzanne Williams
The Name Quilt (2003) by Phyllis Root
Tikki Tikki Tembo (1968) by Arlene Mosel
Who Stole the Cookies from the Cookie Jar? (2000) by Bonnie Lass & Philemon Sturges



Print-Salient Books: Print-salient books—books with few words per page, large letters, and print embedded within the pictures—provide a natural context through which a young child's attention can be directed to letters and words.

Barnyard Banter (2008) by Denise Fleming
Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom (1989) by Bill Martin, Jr. & John Archambault
David Gets in Trouble (2002) by David Shannon
I Stink (2002) by Kate & Jim McMullan
Miss Bindergarten Stays Home from Kindergarten (2000) by Joseph Slate
Mr. Brown Can Moo! Can You? (1970) by Dr. Seuss
Rumble in the Jungle (1997) by Giles Andreae
School Bus (1984) by Donald Crews
Who's There Spot? (2007) by Eric Hill
Yo! Yes! (1993) By Chris Raschka



Alphabet Songs

ABC: Alphabet Bonanza by The Learning Workshop

Alphabet Train

Hungry Worm

All The Fun You Can Sing! By Sharon, Lois, & Bram

ABC Medley: The Alphabet Song, ABC Jig

Keep on Singing and Dancing with Dr. Jean

Alphabet Forwards and Backwards

Shake, Rattle, and Read by Jack Hartmann

ABC Disco

**Learning Letter Sounds*

Vowel Sound Samba

Rockin' The Alphabet

Rockin' The Alphabet

Funky Backwards Alphabet

Sing to Learn with Dr. Jean

**Sing and Sign*

Greg & Steve: We All Live Together, Volume 1

ABC Rock



**adapt for sounds that are not blendable*

Alphabet Songs from YouTube:

(Google "YouTube to MP3 conversion"—the website gives you step by step instructions on how to download the songs onto your computer.)

Sesame Street: Patti Labelle Sings the Alphabet

Sesame Street: Celebrities Sing the Alphabet Song

The Alphabet with Elmo

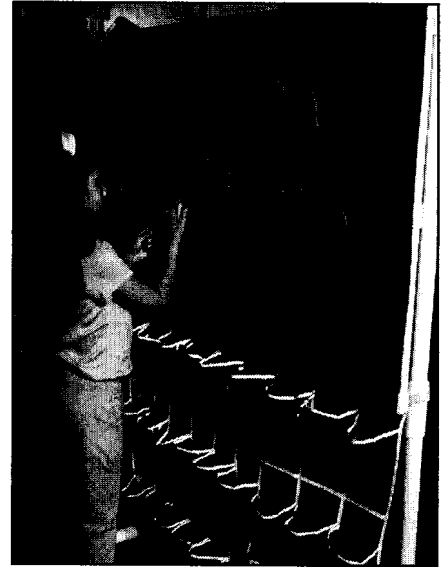
C is for Cookie with Cookie Monster



Alphabet Center Materials

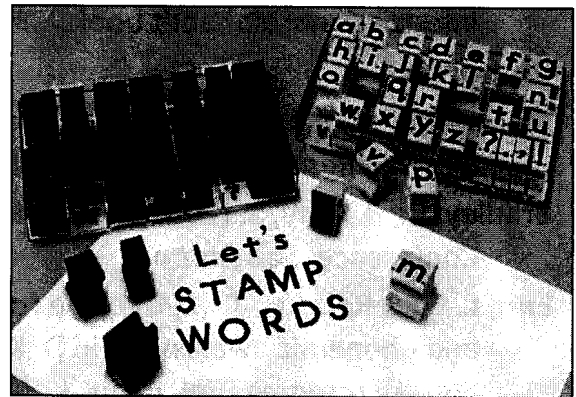
Basic materials

- Upper-and lower case alphabet letters (magnetic or foam) with board
- Alphabet chart or poster at children's eye level
- A variety of alphabet books
- Alphabet puzzles
- Word puzzles
- Alphabet stencils (upper- and lower-case)
- Writing paper
- A variety of writing implements
- Alphabet activities (i.e., name activities, T Chart, Venn Diagram)
- Blank ABC Books



Additional Materials

- Alphabet stamps (upper- and lower-case) with stamp pad
- ABC cards (upper- and lower-case)
- Individual chalk boards with chalk and eraser
- Salt or sand box for handwriting practice
- Table top pocket chart
- ABC Big Books
- High lighter book tape
- Wikki Sticks
- Variety of ABC stickers
- Alphabet lotto
- Magnetic alphabet fish with fishing poles
- ABC board games
- Alphabet arc with letters (upper- and lower-case)



Professional Resources and References About Alphabet Knowledge

Books

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- Kirk, E.W. & Clark, P. (2005). Beginning with names: Using children's names to facilitate early literacy learning. *Childhood Education*, 81(3), 139-144.
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- Treiman, R., & Broderick, V. (1998). What's in a name: Children's knowledge about the letters in their own names. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 70, 97-116.
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Using Manipulative Letters

Understanding of the alphabetic principle—the idea that letters and sounds work together in systematic ways to form words—is critical to the development of decoding skills. An effective way to help children understand the alphabetic principle and to help them develop decoding skills is to use manipulative letters to demonstrate the relationships between letters and sounds. Just as teachers use manipulative objects to make abstract mathematics concepts more concrete for children, manipulative letters can be used to make the abstract concepts of sound blending and segmenting concrete. To make the most out of manipulative letter work, follow these recommendations:

- 📖 Use lowercase letters of just one color. This is particularly important for younger children. Children who are not yet firm in their knowledge of letters and sounds may rely on irrelevant, but more familiar, visual information to figure out words. With multicolored letters, children may focus on the colors rather than the shapes.
- 📖 Demonstrate how the letters come together to form the word, modeling the *segmentation* and *blending* of phonemes by pulling the letters apart and pushing the letters together.
- 📖 Focus on the *onset-rime level* and the *phoneme level* when blending and segmenting the words.
- 📖 Practice both encoding (spelling) and decoding (reading) words.
- 📖 Point out similarities and differences between the new word and a word the students already know by spelling both the new word and the familiar word with the letters.
- 📖 Prompt students to practice both real words and nonsense words. Nonwords provide a truer measure of the student's ability to use letters and sounds to arrive at a pronunciation. Be sure to teach explicitly about the difference between words and nonwords.



Why do we teach children the sounds of letters?

We teach children the sounds of letters so that children can . . .

Sound Types

Most of the sounds in English can be categorized as either continuous or stop sounds and as either voiced or unvoiced sounds. Understanding the type of sound each letter makes helps teachers produce the sound in a way that is useful to children.

Continuous Sounds

- ✓ “Stretch-able” sounds
- ✓ Can be held out or elongated without distortion
- ✓ Easiest sounds for children to blend
- ✓ Use first

Voiced Sounds

- ✓ “Voice” occurs when the vocal folds (aka vocal cords) vibrate.
- ✓ This vibration makes the sound more audible.
- ✓ The vibration may also contribute to sound distortion, especially in voiced stop consonants.

Stop Sounds

- ✓ “Quick” sounds
- ✓ Cannot be held out or elongated without distortion
- ✓ Voiced stop sounds are impossible to produce in isolation
- ✓ Avoid adding “uh” or “schwa” sound

Unvoiced Sounds

- ✓ Unvoiced sounds are produced without vocal fold vibration.
- ✓ Air moves past still vocal folds during an unvoiced sound.
- ✓ Unvoiced stop consonants are easier to blend.

	Continuous	Stop
Voiced		
Unvoiced		